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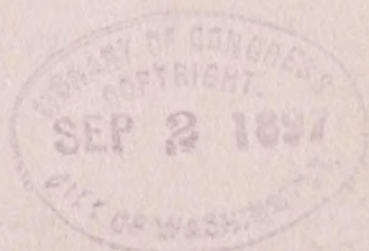
BAS' THERES

A NARRATIVE-DRAMA OF TIROL

BY ✓

JEAN PORTER RUDD

Author of "The Tower of the Old Schloss," "The Little Tailor of the Ritten,"
"In a Field of Buckwheat," etc.



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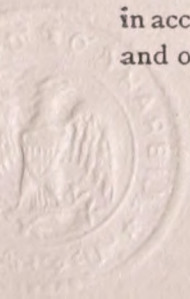
BY

THE AUTHOR

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Norwich, Conn*

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I believe in holiness, truth and beauty ; I believe in love, devotion, honour ; I believe in duty and the moral conscience. I believe in the fundamental intuitions of the human race, and in the great affirmations of the inspired of all ages. I believe that our higher nature is our true nature.

—AMIEL.

PLACE

A Mountain Village of Tirol

SCENE

The White Horse Inn

CHARACTERS

Bas' Theres—Sister to the Wirth and Mistress of the White Horse Inn

Bas' is a title applied to elderly women in Tirol very much as is "Cousin" or "Auntie" in our own rural districts

Nannele—Daughter to the Wirth

The Wirth—Mine Host of the White Horse Inn

The inn-keeper is the magnate of a Tirolean village. First in wealth, in power, in authority ; always an autocrat, sometimes a despot

Petrus—Son to Bas' Theres

An idle, drinking fellow

Herr Walter—The Stranger out of Steiermarkt

Villagers, dancers, rustic fiddlers and others

I

The Coming of the Stranger—the Stranger Out of Steiermarkt

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Bas' Theres Bares Her Heart to the Stranger

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VI

“Na One of Ye Need Go Against Bas' Theres”

FORE-WORD

My story is the story of an old woman — a plain, homely, commonplace old woman, such as there are hundreds of, all about us, everywhere. My old woman had a heart, as most of us have. And she had set her heart on something, as most of us do. And the story tells about it.

BAS' THERES

I

The Coming of the Stranger — the Stranger Out of Steiermarkt

IT could not have been later than four of the afternoon that Herr Walter came swinging up the long steep pitch of hill road to the White Horse inn ; and laughing as he came.

He was somewhat dusty and travel-stained, as a man might well be after six days afoot in the Higher Alps, with night halts wheresoever night overtook him. But he was quite unable to see why, for the mere matter of a little dust more or less, he should be fallen upon to be made game of.

Another man, or he perhaps, had he come on another errand, might have angered himself might-

ily over the unmannerly antics of the village children. For upon his entry to the hamlet a score or more of troublesome young cubs (and there were girls among them) beset him with scoffs and jibes; and began dancing and careering about him as though his like had never been to be seen before.

But Herr Walter had his purpose warm to his heart and a hope that is apt to keep smiles alive on the lips. So he laughed.

All along his way they followed him. Past the scattering farm-cotes and the close-clustered roofs of the village; under the eaves of the motherly old church and even to the very out-spur of the inn itself they came trailing at his heels, hooting and jeering and pointing their fingers at him.

"What is't then, ye rascalings?" he demanded. "Is't that ye ha' never seen a thing that looks like a man before."

"Outlander! Outlander!" they shouted, and pointed their fingers lower down toward his knees.

"*Donner-wetter!*" he ejaculated: then stopped short

and deliberately looked himself over to try and discover what was wrong. For it would never do to present himself like a guy at the inn. He knew he had neither a hump between his shoulders nor a limp in his gait; and on the whole he supposed he had reason to consider himself a rather well set up young fellow. His dress, too, though a trifle weather-stained, was not very unlike the usual costume of Tiroler men. Like them, he wore a jacket of Alpine Loden, cut off so short in the waist behind that the funny little coat-tails bobbed out from under his shoulder-blades just at the points where wings ought to grow. Surely, he did not the less resemble his fellowmen in that, as yet, his wings were still invisible.

His knee-breeches, like theirs, were of blackened chamois leather and, like theirs again, were the coarse hand-knitted leggins of wool that reached to his ankles. But between the leggins and the breeches, just where a Tiroler's legs are bare—brown and knotted too like old mahogany—under-drawers of

white linen bulged out in wide snowy puffs which, to speak truth, were the pride of his heart. In walking, he liked to feel them pull taut when the muscles of his foreleg straightened and flop about loosely again as they relaxed. And now, it seemed, it was at these very knee-puffs that the youngers jeered.

Herr Walter threw back his head and sent a ringing *Jodel* echoing through the air. How I wish, just here, that I could *Jodel* for you and show you how the voice breaks from the deepest of chest tones into shrillest head tones and back again, with amazing rapidity ; yet, oh, so musically. Then how the tones are caught up, echoing and reverberating from the hill-sides until you might almost think that a hundred merry men, with twice a hundred merry voices, were jodeling in reply. To Herr Walter's back was strapped a huntsman's *Rucksack* and in his right hand he carried a stout ash stick feruled with a long iron spike. The stick was notched full half its length in record of many a daring climb over snow-drifted glaciers, or down into yawning ice-green crevasses,

where the iron spike, sharpened to a needle point, had served him well. One date, deeper cut than any other, bore proud witness that Herr Walter had been the first to scale an hitherto unscaled peak ; and there upon the tipmost top, where earth and heaven meet, that it had been his right, as victor, to plant the giant wooden cross which marks a summit.

Altogether, he did not look the sort of man to be easily vanquished.

Suddenly he turned, charged with his Alpenstock, bayonet-wise, and made a feint of pricking the ring-leader with the point of the spike. But when instantly his small tormentors broke ranks and fled for their lives ; shrieking, and tumbling over one another as they ran, he waved the heavy ash pole twice or thrice above his head, as though it were the merest feather-weight, and went on. After this, they did not dare venture quite within sweep of the pole but followed at a wary distance, watching him as he stalked along with never a backward glance toward them, though now and then he lightly swung

his Alpenstock in a remindsome sort of way which sent them shrieking.

It was surprising how their courage revived as the distance increased. But tongue bravery is cheap and soon again rang out the jeering cries :

“Outlander ! Outlander ! *Hei*, what’s the matter with his legs.”

The huge double doors of the inn, standing open, gave flush upon the cool flagged court of the ground floor. Underneath, as Herr Walter knew, were sure to be deep wine vaults and amply stored cellars and winding mysterious catacombs leading, not to the glories of martyrdom but to mundane treasures of good cheer. Above the wide-flung doors and thrusting itself out from the body of the building like a vigorous after-thought, projected the bulging bow-window of the *Stube*. Now the *Stube* (being interpreted) is the very heart of a Tirolean inn ; the one great living room where all the life of the inn goes on—and great part of the village life too, for that matter.

To the *Stube*, accordingly, was Herr Walter bound ; and he would naturally have made his way to it by the inner staircase except that he chanced to see, stretching out along the terraced side-hill to the left, a most inviting strip of garden, all set about with cosy coffee-tables and shaded by trellised vines. The garden was approached from the road by a long flight of outside steps and at the top of these steps a woman was standing.

The woman was Bas' Theres.

Hers was a stout and sturdy figure, commonplace enough, in *Kirtel* of homespun and working apron of blue jean. One gay-plaided kerchief was pinned across her breast and another of duller hue folded, shawl-wise, over her head. Under it, one could see that the hair was already graying ; too early, perhaps. Furrowed deep into the forehead were the fine close lines which come of care ; but the eyes were blue-bright as a girl's and though sharp (and flinchsome to meet if you were in the wrong), they yet were not unkindly. One hand now gripped the

stair-rail—the story of her life was all in that grip—the other was lifted to shield her eyes from the straight level beams of the westering sun.

“A stranger,” she said to herself, as she watched Herr Walter come swinging up the road.

“A stranger. And from out Steiermarkt. I know it of him by his knee-puffs. *Hei, hei*, there. Scatter, ye little scampings,” she called out, instinctively, though the children were not within hearing.

“Away with ye. Away now. Canna ye let a man enter the land in peace?”

On the farther hill slopes cattle were grazing and the gentle ting-a-ling-a-ling of their bells echoed softly over the meadows. In the fields the golden grain was ripening. Near by, from the barn, behind which the lad Petrus was shirking as only he could shirk, came the thud of the busy hand-flails, mingled with men's voices. And nearer still, on the ledge of the water-trough by the roadside, Nannele's earthen milk pans were reflecting the sunlight from their green and yellow glaze.

But in that moment the homely farm-day sights and sounds were all forgotten in the stir of some deeper memory and the keen blue eyes saddened.

"Holy Mother of Sorrows," breathed Bas' Theres.
"Who but I, ah me, should know a Steier man."

"Good day to ye, Frau Wirthin," called Herr Walter just then from below. As he came bounding up the stair, two steps at a time and paused a step or two from the top, he lifted his cap and said again :

"Good day to ye, Frau Wirthin."

"*Na, na,*" she instantly protested. And she must have been answering him out of her reverie for the protest was wholly uncalled for.

"Not the Frau Wirthin. *Na, na.* Only Bas' Theres. Sister to the Wirth am I ; not wife. All the folk hereabout, and everywhere, call me Bas' Theres. It is good enough for me. Ye may call me it too, if ye like. *Ja*, and whether ye like, or *na*. Call me Bas' Theres."

His wide-eyed stare of surprise recalled her to her-

self and, bustling to one side that he might pass, she made haste to speak more graciously.

"Walk up, Herr Stranger. Walk up. And take ye'r choice of a table. What will ye ha' to eat? Something hearty; *nit wahr?* For I can see that ye ha' come a far tramp."

"*Ja wohl*, that I have. Over the hills from Steiermarkt. 'Tis a good six days' tramp, I'd ha' ye to know. But *hei*, 'tis naught to me. For, look here," and he pointed with pardonable pride to the notches in his Alpenstock.

"Good, good," she assented, nodding her head in appreciation. "Ye ha' no need to tell me, ye're a bold mountaineer. One always knows that kind by the look of them. Ye are right welcome, Herr Stranger. And now, what shall I bring ye? A *Schnitzel*, mayhap; *ja?*"

Herr Walter rested his Alpenstock in the angle of the house-wall, slipped the leathern bands of the *Rucksack* off his shoulders and, throwing himself on the nearest bench, leaned his elbows on the table

before him, stretched his long be-puffed legs under it, and yawned. Meantime, Bas' Theres waited with the stolid patience of a sphinx.

"What gives to-day in the larder?" he asked. "Something ready cooked, I hope. Oh, bring me anything ye like, my good woman. Only bring it quickly. For I have a hunger that gnaws in me."

"I'll send the *Madl*," answered Bas' Theres, as she hastily disappeared through a wide doorway into the great *Gasthaus* kitchen.

Herr Walter yawned again and stretched himself. Then he rose and, walking to the far end of the garden path, stood looking off over a charming expanse of fertile valley, threaded by a gurgling little mountain torrent and hemmed in by towering Alps. There was a pleased half-expectant look in his eyes and when he saw the Wirth's daughter emerging from the kitchen doorway with a trayful of plates and glasses—he must have been watching out for her through the back of his head—an irrepressible smile spread itself all over his face.

"*Ach—Du?*" she cried, almost dropping her tray as he came striding back down the path to meet her

"Art glad to see me, Nannele? Art glad? Didna I tell thee I would surely follow thee one day?"

Nannele laughed.

"I thought thou would'st forget," she answered, shaking out the tablecloth with a little snap and beginning to lay the table. Hungrily his eyes followed her quick deft hands, for was there not a *Schnitzel* between two plates, hot-and-hot. Also a loaf of black bread and a measure of good red wine.

"I might ha' thought thou had'st forgotten," she repeated with a coquettish toss of her head. "'Tis so many months ago."

"True," he assented slyly. "'Tis a long, long time. Well nigh a half year; *ja?* But, Nannele, say. Dost remember our pretty dance together that night at the Stern inn? I mind thy telling me then, thou wert never so far from home before."

"Never," she answered. "The father goes abroad but rarely. Even then he didna go willingly, but

Bas' Theres made him. She said he must take me once among my mother's people. That it war only right they should make acquaintance with me. My mother has been dead these many years, but she war near kins-woman to the Stern Wirth of Stadl. Thus it war that we went into Steiermarkt."

"And a rare evening for me when I saw thee first, Nannele," laughed Herr Walter, making rapid play all the while with his knife and fork. "For what have I come then, think? *Ach, Madl*, I'll tell thee to-night when all is still and the stars are a-shining."

Lifting his wine glass toward her and bowing gallantly, he added:

"Mayhap, thou'lt ha' somewhat to answer to me, Nannele?"

But she stood before him shyly, crimping the hem of her apron between her fingers and with her head half turned away.

"I—I do na know," she answered.

"*Hei*, what is this? Thou dost na know?" and he laughed once more in easy confidence. "Did I hear

thee a-right, *Madl*? Thou dost na know? Well, well, never mind."

He stopped to cut himself a huge wedge of black bread before he asked :

"When can I speak with thy father, the Wirth?"

"Always, after nightfall, it is my father's custom to smoke in the *Stube* window," she answered, stiffly.

"But to-night is a *festa*. There are people coming to dance."

"Good. I'm glad of it," he cried gaily. "That is fine. We'll dance our courting dance all over again, *Madl*. *Nit wahr?*"

But now the girl's unwonted shyness was gone and as he put out his hand to her she drew back, letting her apron fall.

"There are many lads who beg me for dances," she teased. "And I—I ha' promised them all."

Pulling a small tobacco pouch from the depths of some pocket he began, leisurely enough, to fill his pipe. But as he sat, jamming the tip of his fore-

finger hard down into the bowl, he would not look at her nor speak.

"There are many lads," she repeated, touching a lighted match to his pipe and flicking the burnt end into the air.

"Until I promised them, they wouldna give me any peace."

"Thou had'st na right," growled Herr Walter between quick fierce pulls at the pipe.

"Na right?" echoed Nannele in surprise. "Surely, it is I who ha' the right to give my dances to whom I will. Have I na, my high-and-mighty Herr?"

"*Ja wohl*, when thou wilt. What is it to me. And thy hand too, thou'lt soon be saying. *Nit wahr?*"

"Oh, my hand—quite certainly," she replied with a cool little stare.

"Unless," she added, in a sudden pretense of timidity. "Unless Bas' Theres take my right from me. And she will, if I canna stand up against her."

"Bas' Theres," questioned Herr Walter. "Who is

Bas' Theres? *Ach ja*, I remember. The old woman who war here just now. What has she to say about it? Has she picked thee out a husband, already?"

"*Ja, ja*, long ago," laughed Nannele. "Listen. It will be Petrus, her son."

Then with a sly glance to see how he would take it, she said:

"Petrus vows that—that he loves me well."

"Good! And thou?" demanded Herr Walter, clouding himself in smoke.

"*Ach*, ye see, I ha' known him all my life. As babes, we slept in one cradle. Boy and girl, we dipped our porridge out of the same bowl. We ha' grown up side by side. *Hei*, we ha' quarreled, too, and made it up again, more times than I can tell thee. And now, Petrus vows that na other *Madl* shall ever be his wife."

"Good! And thou?" persisted Herr Walter.

He was so calm and his tone of voice so indifferent that she began to fear he did not care. Coquetting was all very well, but—

In a sudden quiver of feeling she dropped her eyes and the hot blood rushed to her cheeks. Man-like, the man misunderstood. Giving her a stern look, he took up his *Rucksack* and began to strap it over his shoulders, while he bit his pipe between his teeth.

"I'll go," he said. "It seems, I ha' come on a fool's tramp. There," flinging some coins on the table,

"There's for my reck'ning."

He reached out for his Alpenstock and stood savagely stamping the ground with each foot in turn, until the loose white linen knee-puffs, which were the pride of his heart, fell into place.

Naughty Nannele took courage.

"I war going to say," she began, edging between him and the stair and so blocking his way.

"About Petrus, now. I—I hate him."

"Whew !"

Herr Walter gave voice to a long low whistle and slowly seated himself at the table again. The girl's

eyes were sparkling with fun. But he only looked at her as though he had never seen her before and never cared to see her again, pushed the wine measure toward her and said :

“Draw me another pint, *Madl.*”

Nannele was bewildered and vexed. Why had she not let him go if he wanted to—this tall, masterful fellow who ordered her about so coolly. And whom she found she could not twist round her finger quite so easily as she twisted the gawky lads of the mountain-side.

“I ha’ made him stay, anyway,” she snickered, with a toss of her saucy head as, snatching the carafe, she whisked past him into the kitchen without even deigning to look at him.

It was then that Herr Walter’s face broke into smiles.

“I may as well wait over the dance,” he said to himself.

Down into the deep stone-paved vault where the girl knelt tapping the wine cask, followed Bas’ Theres.

"Nannele, I ha' my eye on thee," she said. "Thou mak'st too free with this stranger lad. What is he to thee?"

"Naught. Except that he is na stranger," answered the girl as she replaced the plug and rose to her feet.

"Na stranger," cried Bas' Theres. "Never has he been here before. This, I could swear. Where hast thou seen him then?"

"At the Stern inn of Stadl. Where thou thyself would'st have it that my father should take me, Bas' Theres."

There was a defiant ring in Nannele's voice and she stood with her clear blue eyes shining straight into the clear blue eyes of Bas' Theres. Will opposed to will.

"*Ach*," cried Bas' Theres, working her sinewy hands one in the other. "No good ever comes of gadding. But why is he here, *Madl*. I'l na ha' thee parley-vooing with stranger lads. Thou art bespoke."

Nannele threw back her head. As yet there were

no fine furrows of care or sorrow in her young face, all aglow with Alpine freshness.

"Bespoke I may be, but na of my own will. Na promise have I yet given to any man."

"*Ach*, child," pleaded Bas' Theres. "Thou knowest it is but the one chance for Petrus. See how he vexes thy father, the Wirth."

"And indeed he is but a lazy *Lump*," she commented under her breath. "Thy father has but scant patience with him. Na more ha' I."

"*Ach* so! And because he is a ne'er-do-weel, is that any reason that I should spoil my life?" cried the girl hotly.

Then because she was young and life had not yet hurt her and she could not know how cruel the words would sound, she added:

"Humph! Thou'st nobody to blame but thyself, Bas' Theres. He is thine own son and thou should'st ha' brought him up better. But let me pass. The stranger waits all this time for his wine."

"'Tis I who will carry it to him," exclaimed Bas'

Theres, snatching the carafe out of the girl's hand.

"Go thou to the fountain with thy water jugs. Then to the *Stube*. It must be swept ere to-night's *festa*. After that, go to the kitchen to help the maids. I'll keep thee busy, *Madl*. Too busy to parley-voo. *Ja, ja*, I'll find thee a-plenty to do. Now go."

No one ever defied the will of Bas' Theres except Nannele herself. Now, however, she only shrugged her shoulders, and went.

II

Bas' Theres Bares Her Heart to the Stranger

THE old inn was like a mediæval castle with its gloomy passages, cavernous chambers, shadowy turns and niches. The deep windows were diamond-leaded, the low ceilings were supported on corner uprights crossed by heavy beams ; and there were crazy bits of nondescript architecture such as winding stairs, circular turrets and arched recesses, where ells and wings had been built on from time to time, haphazard, according to the needs, or the whims, of successive generations.

And here had Bas' Theres held sway this score of years and more. Through all the varying seasons her hand was ever to the fore in house, and field, and farm. She was out among the sowers and reapers ; in the hay-field, the cattle stalls, the mill. She over-

looked the spinning, the weaving, the brewing; and between-whiles, she was always stepping about after the kitchen maids, who never dared loiter nor shirk under the sharp eye and still sharper tongue of the Wirth's sister.

What the hub is to the wheel, was Bas' Theres to her brother, the Wirth. He did all the revolving—and he did little else—but it was she who held the spokes firm in a riveted grip. And for years she had cherished but one ambition. Sleeping or waking, she had dreamed the one fair beautiful dream that daily strengthened her tireless hands.

Now she muttered to herself :

“If I let her wed with the stranger, then my own poor lad will be sent adrift.”

Herr Walter was smoking contentedly and waiting for his wine. When he heard a step approaching he thought it was Nannele's and he did not turn. No, he would let the saucy child be the first to speak. But when for a long time he waited and still no word was spoken, he slowly raised his head and en-

countered the gaze of Bas' Theres fixed intently upon him.

"*Ach* so, Bas' Theres," he said, pleasantly. "Ye will study me then, it seems."

"Ha' ye come for our Nannele?" she demanded, bluntly.

"*Ja wohl*, that I have," he answered still pleasantly, but at the same time thrusting his square chin slightly forward in a queer little way he had.

"I ha' come for Nannele. And I shallna go until I ha' won her for my bride. That is, if I can win her."

"Then it is better that ye go again," said Bas' Theres.

"And wherefore?"

"Because ye shall never win her. The Wirth's daughter isna to be lightly given to—to a stranger from no one knows where."

Herr Walter laughed.

"I'l na go for that," he cried gaily. "The stranger from—Nowhere—will be able to satisfy the Wirth on that point, never fear."

"And am I then, nobody?" cried Bas' Theres.
"I, who nursed her on my knees and rocked her to sleep in the same cradle with my own little one. Many is the hour I ha' rocked the cradle with one foot, while I trod my wheel with the other, a-spinning the flax for their bridal linen. *Ach, na-a, na-a, lieber Herr*, our Nannele isna for any stranger lad."

"What a pretty little *Madl*-babe she must ha' been," said Herr Walter with his ready smile, for her protest had not greatly impressed him.

"*Hei*, that she war," answered Bas' Theres, smiling also. "And later a wild little maid, no less. *Ach*, the pains I ha' taken with her, teaching her to spin, and to bake, and to cast up accounts. She does everything well. And I—I may take pride to myself."

"Indeed ye may. And I thank ye a thousand times, Bas' Theres. Ye ha' trained a rare little wife—for me."

"*Na-na*," cried Bas' Theres. "I'm na a fool. I ha' na toiled and gone sleepless all these long years,

to let it all come to naught. The *Madl* is bespoke. She weds with Petrus, my son."

Herr Walter laughed again; a provoking cool little laugh.

"A *Madl's* hand must go with her heart," he said.

"Heart?" scoffed Bas' Theres. "As though the girl had a heart. She is hard to all the world."

"*So-a? Ach* then, she but pleases me the better."

A grayness like the shadow of a storm-cloud fell over Bas' Theres. She bent forward and leaned heavily with both hands against the table. For a moment her strength was gone.

"Listen, *Junger Herr*," she began. "I ha' only the one son. His father war a lad from out Steiermarkt. I liked him well, too well. And I left my home to go with him."

Sobs thickened her voice, but she went resolutely on.

"A day came when he left me; me, and the babe. We were homeless, helpless, deserted. It war then that my brother, the Wirth, took us home. He has

never let anyone speak aught against me. And he owed me nothing. I had had my portion. The lad from out Steiermarkt—he squandered it. I had na more claim in the house that had been my father's. But the Wirth took us both home, me and the child. Oh, it all happened years ago. Petrus is a man now. And I—I ha' never seen the lad who war his father since that day."

Herr Walter was puffing furiously at his pipe and scowling so that his eyebrows drew together. Bas' Theres straightened herself and locked her hands, one in the other.

"The Wirthin had just died," she continued in calmer tones, "leaving the babe, Nannele. I reared her with my own boy. I vowed that Petrus should be to my brother like to a son of his own; and therefore that he should marry the *Madl*. Thus the inn and the farms might be for them both; these two children of the same blood. Why na?"

There was a pause during which Herr Walter did not attempt to speak.

"It is arranged between my brother and me. He consents. *Nein*, he also wills it. We ha' planned it together for years. Now, *lieber* Herr, ye see, do ye na, why I canna let a stranger lad come between?"

Then squaring her shoulders and setting her hands firm on her hips, she ended :

"*Nein*, and I will na."

"I see it all," said Herr Walter kindly. "Ye ha' been a good mother to both the children, and—and ye ha' had it hard. I'm sorry for ye, Bas' Theres."

His words stung her. For a purpose only had she stooped to bare her proud heart to a stranger.

"How dare ye pity me?" she cried. "I take na man's pity for a gift. I—I am waiting to see ye go."

"Then ye will wait," he retorted. "For it is only from the *Madl's* own lips that I will take my answer. It is she who shall give me the Yes, or the No. Not ye."

Like whipcords stood out the veins on her sinewy hands; the blue eyes widened and glittered, as glitters the blue of burnished steel.

"*Na-na*," she repeated again and again. "*Na-na. Na-na.*"

"And the Wirth?" he asked. "Ye say, it is willingly that he gives his daughter to ye'r son —*ja?*"

Bas' Theres faltered.

"We ha' planned it together," she asserted.

"Rather," he cried, "it is ye who ha' planned it and he that willna oppose ye Isna it so? Tell me the truth, Bas' Theres."

She would not speak falsely, but the next words seemed wrung from her pallid lips.

"The Wirth says—my Petrus is too like—too like the lad—who war—his father."

Herr Walter sprang to his feet, and brought his clenched fist down heavily on the table.

"He is a *Lump* then, a false-hearted good-for-naught," he cried indignantly. "And is this ye'r love — ye'r mother-love — for the *Madl*-babe ye reared?"

Bas' Theres stiffened. It was not his anger that

she feared, but again that strange grayness, the relentless shadow of her painful past, fell upon and veiled her.

"There is other blood in his veins," she muttered.

"He is my son, as well."

Herr Walter softened.

"Look ye, Bas' Theres," he said. "I shallna give up, nor go away. Ye canna expect it of me. But let us make it thus. To-night, when the *festa* is over and the dance is ended, let the *Madl* choose between ye'r son and me. Shall it be so?"

"*Nein, nein,*" cried Bas' Theres. "A *Madl* never knows what is for her own good. 'Tis her elders who must do the choosing for her. She'd be a'most sure to take up with the stranger. Any girl would."

And at this, over Herr Walter's face spread, like a sunbeam, his sudden smile.

III

The Wirth Will Not Go Against Bas' Theres

HALF an hour later, Herr Walter emerged from his chamber in the freshest of white linen knee-puffs and his best holiday suit. He had taken unusual pains with his dressing ; brushing the last speck of imaginary dust from his crimson lapels, polishing his numberless chamois-horn buttons until the gelatin of them shone, drawing his knitted leggins taut and trim and, lastly, tying true-lover's knots in the tasseled green-cord lacings of his leather breeches.

Also, he had been laughing to himself, incessantly, though he could not have told you why.

By the way, did you ever happen to notice a man in love? How he laughs all the time and yet he does not know it. He laughs because he cannot help it, for laughing and loving go hand in hand.

When all was done, he tried to get a satisfactory view of his entire figure in a little six-by-eleven shaving-glass, the only mirror that offered. First, he moved it from the bureau to the window-sill, then to a chair ; next, he held it in both hands, turning it this way and that to the light, while he craned his neck over one shoulder in a vain attempt to judge of the fit of his jacket. It was all of no use and, finally, shaking his head in acknowledged defeat, he set it on the floor and tried a waltz step in front of it. But this was scarcely satisfactory, either, as he could see only one of his boots at a time.

Laughing still, he leisurely refilled his tobacco pouch from the ample store in his *Rucksack*, and went whistling down the long flights of stairs and through the dusky corridors, in the hope that Nannele might hear him and come out from wherever she was hiding. But though he peered into every permissible corner and kept the whistle going bravely, he could not catch a glimpse of her ; and so, reaching the outer door, he started off on a stroll toward the village, to

while away the time until the merry-makers should gather and the dancing begin.

Besides, he had more than a half-intention of searching for the Wirth.

Down the road he went and across the bridge, making a close circuit of the village and pushing on over the fields to the strip of woodland beyond; then back, through the meadows along the edge of the water-conduit which led him, after many windings, to the mill-race and the mill. It was here that he found the old man, placidly leaning against a post and watching the continual splash-splash of the water as it was caught by the buckets and tossed high, to pour and tumble and feather over the old black water-wheel.

"*Grüß Gott*, Herr Wirth," ventured the young man.

"*Grüß Gott*," responded the other. "Though ye're a stranger to me. There's a different cut to ye, someway, from my country-folk. Ye ha' never been here before; *na?*"

And with a queer little inward chuckle he let his slow glance fall on the knee-puffs.

"Yet we ha' met once," answered Herr Walter. "I knew ye just now, the minute I saw ye. It war at the Stern-Wirth's, in Stadl of Steiermarkt. Now, do ye remember? Also, how I danced the whole *festa* through with ye'r daughter."

"*Ja wohl*," snickered the Wirth. "I doubt it na. All the lads are for a-dancing with my Nannerl. She has hard work to choose among them; and she makes them march. *So-a, so-a*, ye come out of Stadl: *ja?* Mayhap ye are making a journey for to see the world?"

"Hm-m, I ha' my purpose in coming," replied Herr Walter. "But I confess, it must hang somewhat upon ye'r own, Herr Wirth."

"*Hei*, and how may that be?" queried the Wirth. "If ye ha' come after farmlands, or cattle, ye'l na find any here. I'd na sell a rood of my land. Mayhap, though, if ye're selling instead, I might buy a horse or two. *Mayhap*, I say. Mind ye, *mayhap*. I

do my trading mostly on market-days. It is then I can get my pick of the whole mountain-side. See?"

It is never very easy to ask an unsuspecting man for his daughter: certainly not in broad daylight, when his mind is absorbed in practical matters. For an instant, Herr Walter lost his air of ready self-confidence.

"Look ye, Herr Wirth," he blurted out. "'Tisna about horses. I'm looking for a wife and my choice lights on ye'r Nannele. That is why I ha' come up into ye'r hills."

"*Ach so-a*," cried the old man, grinning. "Let us make a walk over the fields together and ye shall tell me all about it. What is this? Ye ha' danced with my daughter once—only once, is it na? And now, ye will ask her to wife? *Hei*, but this is curious. Reminds me of when I war young. It goes quickly: *nit wahr?*"

"If ye like," said Herr Walter, recovering his dignity. "We danced together that night at the Stern inn and I said to myself then: 'some day,

when the right day comes, it is this *Madl* I shall ask to marry me.' And—well, now I am here."

The Wirth was a little round man whose head barely reached to Herr Walter's shoulder. As he twisted his neck to look up into the other's face, his eyes twinkled.

"*Ja, ja*," he chuckled. "That is always the way with the younglings. Ye think there is a need to hurry."

"I told Nannele I should come for her one day," pursued Herr Walter, "but she only laughed. Most likely she thought I war fooling. I couldna say any more then, for I had na roof of my own; and I'm na the man to come wooing a Wirth's daughter, while yet my hands are empty."

"It is different now," he finished proudly. "I war heir to my mother's brother and he died one month ago. Herr Wirth, I am *Hof-Bauer* in Stadl, with farmlands as broad as ye'r own."

Steadily over the Wirth's jolly round face a troubled look had been creeping and now there was a per-

ceptible lengthening of the lines from his little red nose to his chin.

"I ha' brought letters from our parish priest and from the Stern-Wirth himself," continued Herr Walter, shoving a packet of papers into the old man's reluctant hand. "It is these that are to speak for me."

"*Ja wohl, ja wohl*," muttered the Wirth, holding the papers at arms' length and squinting at them.

"*Ja wohl*, they speak well of ye. '*Hof-Bauer*,' hm-m! 'Farm, the envy of the country-side;' 'money laid by;' 'steady, honest, temperate,' ——"

"More's the pity," he ended abruptly. "It will be but the harder to send ye away. *Nein!* Ye canna have her."

Herr Walter stared. The two had been walking side by side: they turned now and faced each other.

"I do na like it," broke out the Wirth, peevishly. "I'm na used to—to settling things. Bas' Theres always does that, for us all."

Then with a sudden sharp glance:

"Why need ye be a-coming after my Nannerl? Are there na pretty maids enough in all Steiermarkt?"

Herr Walter laughed.

"Na prettier in the world," he exclaimed, loyally. "But na one of them for me. My mind is fixed."

"Nannerl is young. She has na need to be thinking about marriage;—na yet. She is my only child, and I ha' bred her to be the comfort of my old age. She is all that is left to me. *Na, na*, I canna send her away."

"True," assented Herr Walter, as they walked on again. "But one day she will surely marry. All girls do. Ye—ye wouldna say she should never marry, Herr Wirth?"

"*Na*, not so," answered the Wirth, thrusting his pudgy hands down deep into his pockets. "She may wed as soon as she will and yet bide at home. Look ye, I will give my Nannerl to the son of Bas' Theres. She has known trouble, has Bas' Theres; sore trouble, and her heart is set on this.

Na, na, it isna I who will go against Bas' Theres."

With an impatient kick Herr Walter drove his boot-heel deep into the tender grass.

"She's a good woman, is Bas' Theres—a very good woman. She has doubled the worth of the farm. And she has made the old inn to be known far and wide. I should never ha' got on so well but for her and I might ha' muddled it all. Now, her lad mustna be turned adrift."

"*Ja*, Herr Stranger, I ha' thought it all out. The *Madl* must wed with Petrus. There is na other way."

"And this Petrus?" asked Herr Walter, craftily, "Is he a good lad? Ye can trust him; *ja*?"

The round chubby cheeks drooped once more.

"I'm hoping he'l steady a bit," came the slow reply. "There is naught like marriage to steady a lad. *Ja, ja*, as the years go on he will steady himself, of course he will. As yet he is only a lad."

Then with a sudden fierce passion like the gleam of long-smouldering fire, he burst out:

"*Ach*, I could ha' killed the lad that ruined Bas' Theres."

"*Hei*," cried Herr Walter. "And yet ye will stand by and see the heart of ye'r own *Madl* broken and say never a word."

The Wirth stopped short in a shock of surprise.

"*Na-a, na-a*, that will I na. If the *Madl* wed na willingly, she shallna wed at all."

"Not even for Bas' Theres?"

"*Na*, not even—for—Bas' Theres."

"Good! Then there is hope for me. Tell me this, Herr Wirth. Between Petrus and me, will ye permit the *Madl* to choose?"

"*Nein*, that will I na. 'Twouldna be fair to Petrus. Girls are always taken with a new face. The silly thing might choose for ye and then, *hei*, the mischief war done."

Again over Herr Walter's face spread his sunniest smile.

"Ye are over tender of the lad, it seems to me," he said, lightly.

"Not of the lad, *na, na*," answered the old man.
"But of his mother. She has had trouble enough.
Why then, should I turn her boy adrift?"

"Not adrift, *Nein*. Ye say Bas' Theres has doubled
the worth of the farm. Give him a bit of land then.
And a few score florins to start him fair."

But at this the Wirth's little fat features swamped
themselves in laughter.

"Florins to Petrus," he cried. "Florins to that
spendthrift lad. Not if I know it. Florins do na
come so easy. And a bit of farmland, ye say?
Humph! Where would it be next harvest-time?
Tell me that. Give money and lands to Petrus.
Hei, hei, it is all ye know."

"And yet, ye will give him ye'r daughter?"

"*Ja*, that is different. Petrus would then be
Wirth, after me. He'd ha' naught to do, or a'most
naught. Nannerl would manage it all. And she'd
keep a tight hold of the purse-strings, would little
Nannerl. *Ja, ja*, Bas' Theres will ha' taught her
that."

Drawing out his loose baggy pockets and shaking them ruefully, he added with a merry wink :

“Empty, see? Do you think I do na know how it would fare with Petrus?”

But the next moment he laid his hand on the stranger's arm and said, gravely :

“Give it up, *Junger Herr*. Give it up, for it can never be as ye wish. Look ye, Bas' Theres had a trouble in her youth. And it is na I—not I—who will bring a sorrow to her old age.”

And so saying, the Wirth turned short off at a cross-path, leaving Herr Walter to find his way back to the inn in whatsoever state of mind it might please him.

It was dusk and the twilight shadows lay deep and still in front of the wide-yawning doors of the inn, near which Herr Walter lingered on the possible chance of waylaying Nannele and getting a word with her before the dance should begin. For,

“It all hangs now on the will of the *Madl* herself,” he kept repeating over and over.

At last he heard her come running and clattering down the long stairs from the upper garden, letting her water-jars bump heedlessly against the rail at every step. He knew it was Nannele, because she was singing a little catch-y chorus of the mountain-side which she had tried to teach him that night at the *Stern* inn. He recalled how he had purposely been rather stupid about it, so that she must needs sing it to him over and over again; and how he had kept her apart from the dancers until he learned it—by heart. Now, as she crossed the road to the water-trough and slipped her jars under the fountain, he followed her, calling softly:

“Nannele, Nannele, art there?”

And forgetting that she still knew nothing of what his mind was full, he leaned forward over the edge of the water-trough, to plead:

“Nannele, promise me now, right here, that to-night thou wilt choose for me.”

She had not seen him and for an instant she was startled; then she began to laugh.

"*Hei*, art thou still here, Herr Stranger? I thought, mayhap, thou wast gone again to thy Steier country. Choose? What ha' I to choose? I do na understand."

"I ha' spoken with the Wirth already, Nannele, and with Bas' Theres. They are determined to marry thee to thy cousin. But to-night, after the dance, I shall ask thee of thy father. And it is then that thou must choose—between Petrus and me."

"And why then must I choose to-night?" she demanded, haughtily. "Or why must I choose at all? Have I na a right to my own life? And to do with it what I will?"

"I—I will not be hurried so," she added, with a tremulous break in her voice.

"It isna I who would hurry thee, Nannele," he answered, gently. "Only, ye see, I ha' come as I said I would and now, if I'm sent away, they will marry thee to Petrus. They willna let thee have any choice."

There was silence, save for the splash of the water

flowing over the brimming jars into the trough beneath.

"If thou choose for me, Nannele, thy father willna thwart thee. But thou needs be firm. Thou must pit thy will against the will of Bas' Theres."

"Bas' Theres has known naught save sorrow," said the girl, thoughtfully. "The lad she loved, broke her heart. The lad who is her son, breaks it now again. *Ja, ja*, I can see it, though she tries to hide it, even from herself."

"Oh!"

Herr Walter sighed. Certainly in all this, nothing was being made very easy for him.

"Her heart willna break the less, when thine shall ha' broken too," he answered, almost roughly.

"Hearts," she cried. "Let us na talk of hearts. *Ach*, why should there come lovers. They are but tiresome folk. I ha' always heard it and now I know. Let me pass, Herr Walter. I must dress for the dance."

She reached out for the water-jars but he laid his hands on them to detain her.

"Nannele," he urged. "Dost forget thy words in the Stern-Wirth's *Stube*? When I said I would surely follow thee one day, what said'st thou to me in return?"

"I said, 'Come an thou wilt,'" she laughed. "What is it then to say: 'Come an thou wilt;' I might say it to many a lad. Such light-spoken words do na bind."

Then in a strained voice:

"It is thou who art over-confident, Herr Stranger. 'Tisna enough to stretch out thy finger, and beckon. Think'st, thou hast but to call, 'Nannele, Nannele,'—and I'm to make answer; '*Ach*, thank thee and thank thee a thousand times?' Give me my water-jars. I'm tired of it all. Let me go."

That square chin of his had been thrusting itself forward and there was a gleam in his eyes; but presently the gleam changed to a smile. Perhaps, after all, he had been a little too impatient.

"*Wohl, wohl*, it shall be as ye say," he replied, dropping the caressing "*Du*." "I couldna stay now, after what ye ha' said to me. Good-bye, Nannele."

"Oh, are ye really going?" she faltered. "Can ye na stay—well, over the dance."

"What's the use?" he asked. "Ye ha' promised all ye'r dances, ye say. I suppose now, ye couldna spare me—even one?"

Nannele meant to refuse all other partners for him; wickedly, she had looked forward to making the village lads jealous and the *Mädchen* envious. Now, though she could not help biting her lip in keen disappointment, she answered, in a tone that sounded more than half-reluctant: "Mayhap I might—just one—since ye ha' came so far."

"I ask only one," said Herr Walter.

His voice was sad, but his eyes were twinkling and, in the friendly dark, he let that broad smile of his have its own way over his face.

"I ask only one. Petrus may have all the rest. I shall never come between ye and him, Nannele."

With this, he caught up the water-jars, one in each hand, and ran with them swiftly up the slope and through the garden to the open kitchen door, where one of the astonished maids took them from him.

IV

*"Thou and I Will Wed One Day; It Is the Will
of Bas' Theres"*

BAS' THERES followed her brother, the Wirth, into the deep alcove of the *Stube* window, where he sat comfortably established for the evening in his elbow-chair, with pipe and tobacco-pouch on the table before him.

"Hast heard?" she began. "The young stranger from out Steiermarkt is come a-courting our Nannele. Hast heard?"

"*Ja, ja*, I know. He spoke to me down by the mill. 'Tisna a bad chance, Bas' Theres. He showed me letters which tell of him. Look thee, he is *Hof-Bauer*; and a man of respect."

"*Ach so-a*. He is, is he?" she muttered; and her heart turned sick.

"And thou?" she demanded. "What hast thou answered him then? Surely, thou wilt scarce give thy *Madl* to a stranger? A man from another country?"

"*Ach*, what is that? Doesna Steiermarkt join close to Tirol? Country has naught to do with it. I tell thee, 'tis a rare chance for the *Madl*. I misdoubt, she'l ne'er have so good a one, ever again."

The woman's breath came in quick catching gasps.

"And what hast thou answered him?" she asked once more.

"I said," returned the Wirth, slowly. "I said him, '*Nein.*' Though it hurt me sore to do it. I'll always believe our Nannele has missed of a rare good chance. But I said him, '*Nein.*' I—I wouldna go against thee, Bas' Theres."

"*Küss der Hand!*" she exclaimed, as she drew a long breath of relief and her face cleared.

"*Küss der Hand!* Thou wast ever a good brother to me. I might ha' known thou would'st na fail me in this."

But there was still something in the expression of his face—or rather, perhaps, in the stolid want of expression—which impelled her to justify herself.

“Surely,” she cried. “It isna I, who would fail in good-will toward the *Madl* I reared. When then, hast thou ever seen me putting myself before her ; tell me that ? *Hei Bruder*, dost hear ? Tell me that.”

“I never said thou had’st na been a good mother to her,” he answered.

“Also !” she went on, vehemently. “There are two ways of looking at it. Think now a bit. This lad is unknown to us, *nit wahr* ? Hof-Bauer he may be, and I care na what more besides, but a stranger is yet always a stranger. Though thou may’st know the worth of his farm, thou can’st na know his heart, nor his temper. *Na, na*, a *Madl* is better off among her own kin. *Ach*, do na I know ? And I’d say the same, *Bruder*, if Petrus war already gone to the other side of the world.”

“*Ach*, thou’rt right, Bas’ Theres,” cried the Wirth, glad to bring his mind to a full stop.

"'Tis well the *Madl* has thee, for thou'rt always right."

Later when, already flushed with wine, Petrus came slouching in at the open kitchen door, Bas' Theres hastened forward to meet him and to draw him out of the circle of the fire-shine where the maids were busy, while she whispered :

"Petrus, I want thee to make thyself fine to-night, in thy brave new jacket and hose. I ha' laid them out for thee. And I ha' polished the silver clasps of thy belt. *Ach*, I ha' taken great pains, for I will have thee the handsomest lad in the *Stube* to-night. And Petrus, for once let the *Schnapps* pass thee by ; *ja* ? Thou'st been drinking red wine, more than enough. Give a care, or thou'lt na have a steady foot to the dance. Promise me, Petrus lad. Promise thine anxious old *Mütterli*."

"Oh, I promise," he answered, indifferently. "I ha' promised thee oft-times before, *Mütterli* ; *nit wahr* ? A promise is easy made." And he laughed.

"But to-night of all nights, Petrus," she urged.

"Thou can'st na tell how much may hang on it, just to-night. Listen. A stranger lad has come over the hills, a-courting our Nannele. He's a right pretty lad, too. But mind well what I say and he will go again as rich as he comes; and no richer."

"A stranger lad? And for Nannele? Good! Let him ha' her then. I'd be glad if she war married and gone. I ha' no leaning more toward the Wirth's *Madl*. *Ach*, I know well what thou would'st say, but I like her na. I ha' done thy bidding, *Mutter*. *Ja*, I ha' done it more than once. But as often as I ask her, she scorns me and laughs. And 'tis a rare sharp edge she has to her tongue, also. Then let the stranger lad take her, *Mütterli*. Why should we care?"

"*Ach*, but Petrus, art turned fool?" she cried. "The *Madl* is a good *Madl*; na matter about her tongue. 'Tis na worse than my own and thou'rt well used to that. Indeed, I could never ha' brought thee up, without it. Bethink thee, thou silly lad. If Nannele goes, then will go also the farm and the inn and the Wirth's florins laid by."

Even as she spoke the woman-heart of her melted, while a wistfulness stole into and softened the bright blue of her eyes.

"Sure, I know thee, Petrus. Thou art my own lad, the little lad who war my baby. Thou'rt a good lad—at heart. A bit wild, Petrus, and lazy. I ha' called thee *Lump*, oft and oft; and I ha' had reason. But the heart of thee isna bad. It couldna be and I be thy *Mutter*. For listen, Petrus. I'm shrewd, mayhap, and I'm 'near,' and I manage everybody—but then, most folk are such fools. And I like to ha' my own way—but that's only because my way is the best. All the same, I ha' a good heart in me. Sure, that thou knowest; *nit wahr?* "

When he made no reply, she caught her breath and went on :

"Tell me true, Petrus. Thou could'st na be aught save a good *Mann* to our Nannele; *na?* "

Petrus laughed coarsely :

"The *Madl* can take very good care of herself, *Mutter*. 'Tis her *Mann* thou should'st pity, instead.

If it must be, it must ; but I see na call to hurry."

Her patience now utterly exhausted, Bas' Theres seized him by the shoulders and shook him, vigorously.

"Petrus, thou *Dummkoph*," she cried. "Didna I tell thee a stranger had come? He isna one to lag, nor to dawdle, nor to say there's na need of hurry. He has a way with him, also, that wins on a *Madl*; a bit masterful and yet eager. *Ach*, do na I know?"

As Petrus lifted his heavy head and his dulled eyes cleared a little, she added :

"He is *Hof-Bauer*, while thou hast naught. And thou'rt no longer a child, that the Wirth should be tender of thee. Petrus, I tell thee now, 'tis thy one chance in life. Thou'rt a fool, if thou let it slip."

"The Wirth's wealth has come by thy toiling and saving, *Mutter*. It is thine, and mine, by right; that's the way I look at it. But I'll take Nannele. Not that I like her—overmuch—but I'm used to her; and we may as well settle it. I'll ask her to-night. *Ja*, I'll give her na peace till I ha' her word. And

between us, *Mütterli*, we'll drive the stranger back to his own country after a wife ; *ja ?* "

As he went stumbling up the stairs to his chamber in the loft, Bas' Theres stepped briskly about the kitchen with a feverish flush on her cheeks and an unwonted tremor of limb.

"If this night fail me," she muttered over and over to herself. "If this night fail me —."

For, ever since he had lain on her breast, a helpless babe, she had pondered in her heart of how one day she might "make it up to him," that he was nameless.

The *Stube* was clean-swept and the heavy pine tables had been scrubbed with soap-and-sand until they glistened. Little by little, as the dancers grew thirsty, these would be covered with rows on rows of huge earthenware beer-mugs, the amber-hued liquid foaming and frothing over their rims ; with decanters of red Alpine wine ; and with boxes of humpy cheroots, or better still, of cut tobacco for every man's pipe. Then while the air was thick with smoke and the wine went round, there would be the sound of

laughter and singing, of wassail and jollity, far on into the night and to as near break of day as Bas' Theres would permit.

The Wirth sat at his own table in the window-alcove, pipe in mouth, with his chosen cronies about him; the Doctor, the Notary—companions of his boyhood—and the Herr Major, a retired Prussian officer, who was shuffling the cards for their evening pastime; while the village priest, in rusty cassock and of meagre jaw, who had been a boy, too, with the others, leaned across the table on his elbows to watch the game with the peculiarly intense, yet carefully suppressed, interest of one who has renounced the pomps and vanities of this wicked world.

The long, low-raftered room was filled by village boys and girls, young farmers from the hills with their rustic sweethearts; and a few finer grained folk from the town. There were even one or two stray young gentlemen—two barons and a count—seeking a night's entertainment.

Small lamps screwed here and there to the wall, cast flickering glimmers of light out into the room—flicks and glims that had need to cut through dense blocks and masses of shade, for the oak-paneled *Stube* was dark with age and broken by doorways hid deep in shadow.

On a bench in the corner behind the high, white stove, whose glazed porcelain tiles cheerily reflected such light as there was, lounged a quartette of rustic fiddlers, resining their bows and squeaking their fiddle-strings in the process of "tuning up"—a most welcome sound that was instantly echoed in all parts of the room by the impatient scraping and stamping of heavy hob-nailed shoes.

The half-moon table had a lamp of its own that shone full upon the Wirth's placid countenance, from which every least trace of care, or of dubitation, had vanished. Having dropped his personal responsibilities into abler hands than his own, as had been his habit for years, he contentedly gave himself no further anxiety.

“Bas' Theres is sure to bring things through ; and to bring 'em through right,” was his trustful conclusion. “Why then should I meddle ? I ha' always heard that, ‘Whoso meddles, is like to mar.’ I'l ha' naught to do with it. Bas' Theres shall manage it all.”

For long ago the little round Wirth had learned the luxury of letting some one else do his thinking for him and now he sat smoking, pipe after pipe, as tranquilly as though his daughter's future were no possible concern of his.

Through the long corridor, from the open door of the kitchen beyond, streamed a broad band of fire-light ; and crossing this at intervals, appeared the sturdy figure of Bas' Theres, as she bustled about among the maids who were all robed for the *festa* in their holiday *Kirtels* and kerchiefs.

Nannele chanced to be standing in the full glow of the fire-light. She was looking her prettiest, with her glossy braids fresh-plaited, the loose white sleeves of her chemisette pushed above the elbows

showing her rounded arms, the soft folds of her kerchief out-lining the softer curves of her throat; and the silken ribbons that fastened her apron about the waist, falling in long fluttering ends to the edge of her *Kirtel*.

She was not rejoicing in her prettiness, however, as a pretty girl ought to rejoice, but was standing, instead, with her eyes fixed on the floor and her hands hanging idle before her. She did not heed, nor even seem to hear the other maids when, winking at one another, and giggling, they came jostling against her to ask, teasingly :

"What ails thee, then, Nannerl? Seek'st thou thy future, writ on the floor? Dost see there the shadow of thy *Mann*, that tells thee he too is a-coming? Sure, such signs never fail. *Hei*, but thou'rt sour. Mayhap, he's na to thy liking. Well, what of that? 'Tisna every *Madl*, can ha' her pick of a *Schatz*."

One, somewhat bolder than the others, pinched her bare arm to make her listen, while she whispered in mock sympathy :

“Na wonder thou’rt sour, Nannele. What is he for a *Schatz*, to wear loose linen puffs—like nothing, if na like thy chemisette sleeves—at his knees. But mayhap, ’tis naught. If ‘the coat doesna make the man,’ knee-sleeves needna un-make him. Thou must just do thy best and take what the saints send thee. *Hei, hei.*”

But laugh as they might, Nannele only shrugged her shoulders and would not open her lips.

Herr Walter, who had been looking for a hiding place, found one in the shadowy hollow of the garden doorway, whence, with no fear of being observed, he could see into the kitchen and into the *Stube* as well. For, as he told himself laughingly, “where he had so many foes, he must needs be on the alert; that now, no one could pass along the corridor without his knowing it; and, at a moment when she least suspected it, little Nannele might be caught, unawares.”

Meanwhile, he was pleasing his eyes with the sight of her and just beginning to wonder what it could

be that troubled her, when Petrus came running down stairs, and crossed the kitchen hurriedly. For an instant, the fire-glare gleamed on his handsome face, on the red lapels of his jacket, and on the rich silver clasps of his belt; the next, he had passed on his way to the *Stube*.

Half-way there he stopped, glanced back at Nannele, wavered as though in doubt and then, apparently, made up his mind it was best to wait. Herr Walter could see him as he loitered up and down the passage, peering first into the *Stube*, then returning to peep into the kitchen again; until finally, resigning himself with a yawn, he leaned back against the wall, where the line of shadow fell darkest, and waited with what show of patience he could.

All the while Herr Walter was laughing to himself.

"*Hei*, what is this? Petrus in hiding too; *ja*? Now, what is he after? 'Tis getting to be as good as a play. Good then! We shall see which of us

two comes out first-best in the last act. He, the silly *Dummkopf*, or I."

At this moment Bas' Theres came up from the cellar with a great jug of beer in her hands and, looking about her for a maid—the instant her step was heard they were all as busy as bees—she saw Nannele standing alone by the fire, idle and distraught.

"*Hei*, thou Nannerl," she cried. "Carry this beer to the *Stube*. And be quick about it, *Madele*. 'Tis for the Wirth's own table and, thee knows, thy father canna bide to wait."

Nannele started and looked up; then taking the jug obediently, she poised it half on her hip, half within the crook of her elbow and thus weighted, moved briskly along the passage. She did not see Petrus until he called to her.

"*Hei*, na so fast, Nannele. Na so fast. I ha' a word I must speak with thee, before the dancing begins."

"Do na hinder me now, Petrus," she remonstrated.

"Dost na see, I ha' the heavy jug to carry? Let me pass."

To elude him she made a wide curve and would have darted by, but he put himself square in front of her and stretched out his long arms, blocking her way.

"When I tell thee to wait, thou'lt wait," he said.

"*Hei* then, will I?" she cried, stooping low to effect a swift sudden swoop under his arm. Quick as she was, however, he was quicker still and at once she found herself held fast, by his rough hands on her shoulders.

"What ails thee, Nannele?" he asked. "Come now, be a sensible *Madl*. I ha' much to say to thee, and I'm bound to say it to-night. Let thee go? *Ach ja*, I'll let thee go. But first, thou'lt promise to come back to me, and to let me have my say full out; *ja*?"

"Thou'st naught to say that I care to hear," she made answer.

"But thou—Oh, thou'rt pretty to-night, Nannele,"

he smiled down upon her. "Prettier than I ha' ever seen thee. Thou must promise me a dance. *Nein*. What am I saying? I'd na be content with one, nor yet with two, nor with three. I have it. Thou shalt take me for thy *Schatz*, Nannele, and dance every dance with me."

The fiddlers had begun to play and the *Stube* was filling with couples in waltzing whirl; the women's *Kirtels* swinging out in wide circles, the men's hob-nailed shoes making dents in the floor. The lights flickered gaily into shining eyes and smiling faces, upon the silken sheen of apron, or kerchief; facet gleams sparkled in the neck-beads worn by the women; while the black-cock's plumes in the men's hats, bobbing and bending, threw up grotesque shadows to the ceiling.

Nannele tapped one impatient foot on the floor and shifted her heavy jug to the other hip.

"Dost na hear them at it, Petrus?" she cried. "Let me go then."

"*Ja wohl, Madl*, I'll let thee go," he answered,

tightening his hold on her shoulders. "But na till thou hast told me ; and told me true. Wilt take me for thy *Schatz*? And wilt thou prove it in there, before them all, by dancing every dance with me?"

"I canna," she faltered, for his manner frightened her. "I canna, Petrus. I ha' already promised—one."

"*Ja wohl*, to the stranger, *nit wahr*?" he exclaimed in fierce anger. "Bas' Theres says he has come a-courting thee. But thou shalt send him away. I will have it, that thou send him away. Dost hear?"

"Let me go then," she cried. "For, if thou must know, I—I ha' already told him, *Nein*."

It was less an answer than an out-burst ; born partly of pique, but more of her eagerness to escape. Herr Walter, clenching his fists in the ardent longing to knock Petrus down, yet holding himself back to afford his rival fair play, heard what she said and a queer little half-smile flitted over his face.

Bas' Theres, who had come bustling into the

passage to see, "what all this clatter and chatter might be about," heard also—and gasped. For a moment, as she turned blind and faint, the two figures spun dizzily before her eyes. Then, in sheer relief, she could have laughed aloud over her own anxiety and her foolish fears that had all been needless.

"*Ach wohl*," said Petrus, airily. "The rest is easy then. Thou and I will wed one day; *nit wahr?* It is the will of Bas' Theres, and I am ready. Thou hast but to say the word, *Madl*."

"Let me pass now, Petrus," she begged. "Thee knows my father is waiting for his beer."

"*Hei*, let him wait," sang out the young fellow, with a confident ring in his voice. "I want this settled right now. Wilt na promise me, Nannele? Say "*Ja*," and be done with it, that's a pretty *Madl*. Let the stranger go back over the hills, as he came, and marry a maid out of his own country. I am good enough for thee, Nannerl; *nit wahr?*"

"The stranger may go where he likes and wed

with whom he will," cried Nannele, hotly. "He is naught to me. But thou, Petrus—what art thou for a man, to hold a girl fast when she wants to be free. Let me go. I tell thee, let me go ; or I—I'll scream."

Petrus laughed.

"But I like thee so well, Nannele," he teased.

"And I like thee na," she retorted. "I despise thee. I hate thee. I wish I might never see thee again."

"What is he for a *Dummkoph!*" muttered Bas' Theres, from behind the door.

"*Ach!* I but like thee the better that thou'rt so fierce," he persisted, still laughing. Loosing one hand from her shoulder and slipping it under her chin, he forced her lips close up to his face and repeated :

"I like thee all the better for it, *Madl*, and thou'rt the prettier for it, too. A very pretty *Madl* to-night ; very. I never ha' seen thee so pretty before. *So-a*, an thou wilt, I'll take a kiss of thee."

"Have a care," she cried. "An thou wilt, or na, thou'lt take something else of me, instead."

There was a sudden toss of her empty hands in the air, a splashing noise, followed by the shattering of earthenware ; and Petrus had need of both his hands and of his great red cotton handkerchief besides, to wipe the blinding beer from his eyes and mouth.

“*Hei*, but thou’rt the *Teufel’s* own *Madl*,” he called after Nannele, as she sped down the corridor. And I—I’ll be the *Teufel’s* hired man till I ha’ made thee pay for this.”

V

A Folk-Dance in the Stube

NANNELE stopped in the garden doorway to let the evening air blow cool upon her. She was panting, her face burned, and her hands kept working themselves in and out under the gathers of her apron.

Soft breezes came sighing up from the valley below to meet the swift rush of air sweeping down from the snow-mantled peaks. And the trysting place of the winds could have been no other-where than the neighboring tree-tops, for these were bending and swaying, whistling and singing; and, by their very abandonment to riotous play, revealing their rapturous secret. From higher up the mountain-side reflected, like an undertone, the deep continuous murmur of the pines, whose lonely plaint never ceases. For what the genius is among men, that is the pine among trees.

Near by sounded the trickle of the fountain ; in the cattle-stalls was heard the contented crunch-crunch of dumb mouths relishing a sweet morsel of fodder ; while over all, steadfastly calm, shone the far white stars in the clear sea-blue vault of the sky.

"Thou hast done well, Nannele," spoke Herr Walter, stepping toward her out of the shadows.

"*Heilige Mutter !*" screamed the girl.

"There is naught to fear, *Madl*," he said. "It is only I. And do na I tell thee, thou hast done well? 'Tisna every man can get a jug full of beer at one draught. *Hei, hei*, thou hast done better than well."

"What hast heard then?" she demanded, in a fine flush of shame over her temper.

"*Ach*, everything ; nothing ; what does it matter? We ha' had worries enough for to-night ; *nit wahr*? And now is the time to be gay. Listen, Nannele, they are tuning for another waltz. Thou did'st promise me one dance. Let it be this."

"*Na, na*, I canna dance yet," she cried. "I'm too hot—too angry, I mean. Mayhap I'l never dance again."

Even as she said this, however, she was half-unconsciously tapping one foot in time to the music and at last, impatiently reaching out her hand to him, she exclaimed :

“Come, then. Come. Dost na hear? We are losing it all.”

Instantly, with his arm around her waist, they went waltzing merrily down along the passage as far as the *Stube* door, but at the threshold he held her back to whisper :

“Let us show them the Steiermarkt folk-dance. Dost remember it? And how I taught it to thee, that night at the Stern-Wirth’s?”

“*Ja, ja*, I remember it well,” she answered, with a ringing laugh that cleared the last vestige of ill-humour out of her voice. Her cheeks were as fresh as the night-air itself and her eyes seemed to have caught their shine from the stars.

Nannele’s part was simple. She had merely to spin round and round, exactly like a top, and to go on spinning whatever might happen. Taking her place,

therefore, at the extreme end of the *Stube* she began to whirl; slowly at first, but slightly, though surely, increasing her speed with every turn. One arm was curved up over her head; the other hand caught her wide apron by the hem and held it straight out at arm's length like a silken sail. Never stopping, never reversing, she went spinning on and on, down one side of the long room and up the other—faster, faster, faster—with almost the mechanical precision of a teetotum, save that she could not help it when her eyes would sparkle and her lips would part in smiles.

Herr Walter followed her closely with his hands squared on his hips, his head thrown back, and his fantastic steps shifting and changing in strict accord with Nannele's whirls. There were *trois-temps* steps forward and back, with a clapping of heel-and-toe on the re-echoing floor; marvellous leaps and springs, with flying vaults over any table or chair that chanced to be in his way; then a somersault, or a "cart-wheel," so quickly turned, that all anybody

could distinguish was an unexpected twinkle of heels in the air.

Occasionally, too, he would break line and dash down the centre to twirl an unsuspecting *Mädchen*, and delight in her startled shriek. Or he would suddenly snatch the feathered hat from some bumpkin's head, toss it from hand to hand like a ball, and keep his own face sober, amid a chorus of wild guffaws.

Afterward there would be a quick spring back to place, a moment or two of quiet waltz-measure with, perhaps, a graceful Spanish-like sweep round and round his ever spinning partner. It was not until he observed Nannele to be growing dizzy and breathless, that he brought the whole thing to a finish by a few intricate steps worthy of a stage-dancer and as light as though his thick-soled tramping boots had been the daintiest of ball-room pumps.

Instinctively, from the first, the company had fallen back, crowding against the wall to leave the space open. The dignitaries at the Wirth's table put down their cards, turned square about in their chairs and

stared, open-mouthed ; while the musicians behind the stove, bending double with zeal, scraped their squeaking fiddles as they were never scraped before. When at last, panting for breath and laughing, Nannele dropped on a bench to rest, Herr Walter stood mopping his forehead amongst a crowd of young fellows, who came pressing about him, clapping him over the shoulder, and crying out :

“ Good ! ” “ Good ! ” “ What is this for a dance ? ”
“ And it is ye that ha’ the pretty leg, *Mann*. ” “ Wilt show us the steps ; *ja* ? ” “ One-two, one-two. ” “ So it goes ; *nit wahr* ? ”

“ Ye should all ha’ been born Steiermarkt men,” he answered them, laughing. “ ’Twould ha’ come to ye then, by nature.”

“ What comes na by nature, comes oft-times by grace,” proffered one hobble-de-hoy, with a sly look askance at the priest.

“ *Ach*, I’l teach every man of ye, right willingly,” exclaimed Herr Walter. “ And ’tis na much to learn. Look then.”

As he tried over a few of the easier steps every man there, and particularly those who had sweethearts looking on, began to leap and to hop in the liveliest imitation ; while the girls themselves eagerly took the floor for a spin. Immediately there was a shuffling of heels all about him, a swing of *Kirtels* and spreading of apron-sails, a laughing and a chattering and a calling out :

"Look, didna I do it well?" "A pretty dance, so it is." "Better than the waltz, or the cotillion ; *nit wahr?*" "*Ja wohl*, even as our own Tirol is better than Frenchy-land. And who says aught else is no true Tiroler."

One strapping fellow even bussed his sweetheart then and there before them all, as he shouted :

"A dance is a dance. But I tell ye, lads, naught is a pretty dance that na ends with a kiss."

Herr Walter had been watching his chance to break away and now, in the ensuing out-burst of hilarious laughter, he crossed the room to where Nannele was sitting and, stooping toward her, whispered in her ear :

"Go again to the garden doorway. I ha' a word I must speak with thee."

"*Na, na*," he urged, as she tossed her head, "Go now, that's a good *Madl*. And do na be hanging back to ask me, for why."

Along the passage came Bas' Theres bearing a huge hand-tray of pretzels and beer. While Herr Walter stopped to help himself to one of the foaming mugs and, throwing back his head, thirstily drained it to the very last drop, Nannele slipped by, unobserved, and waited in the doorway for him to join her.

The garden was deserted. Sounds of revelry floated upon the air, but the winds were at peace. Only a low soft murmur came from the distant pines; and the silent stars were an hour lower down in the west. As Herr Walter drew Nannele's arm within his own and led her to the far end of the garden path, they were quite alone.

There was a laughing flash in the girl's eyes and dimples played round her mouth.

"Thy one dance war equal to a thousand," she cried.

"Then thou owest me a thousand kisses," he retorted. "A kiss for a dance. 'Tis the custom of thy village; *nit wahr?* I wouldna be out of the fashion."

"*Na, na,*" she protested. "That war only Big Seppl with his sweetheart. And they're to be married next Lady-day."

"What a pretty night it is, Nannele," he said. "So still; and so fine. Tell me, which pleases thee best. To be in there with the dancers, or—or out here alone with me?"

"*Ach*, I like better to dance," she answered, with a toss of her head. "Always, when I hear the music and I'm na dancing, I think to myself: 'Oh, what a waste!' But do na I tell thee, thy dance war equal to ten. My head, it gocs spinning still. Besides, it war na fair. I but promised thee one."

"For all that, it is a right pretty dance, Nannele, *ja?*"

"*Ja wohl*," she assented, heartily. "The prettiest dance I ha' ever seen. I believe I could go on a-dancing and a-spinning—mayhap, forever."

"Good! That is what I will know. 'Tis why I ha' brought thee here. I ha' a favor to ask of thee, but first—."

He paused a moment, drawing his breath hard and short.

"Look here, Nannele. Answer me. Is it true that the stranger from Steiermarkt may go where he likes, and wed—with whom he will? Have a care, Nannele."

"*Ja*," she made answer, slowly. "I ha' said it once before to-night. And I say it again. The stranger may wed—with whom—he will."

"Good! Then he weds with thee, Nannele."

"*Na, na*," she cried. "It war na so I meant it. I—I—."

"Listen, Nannele," he said, gravely. "I love thee. I ha' tramped from a-far to tell thee so. And I will wed na other *Madl*, be she whom she may. To-night,

in the face of thy father and of Bas' Theres, I shall ask thee to be my wife. What then, *Liebele* ? ”

“ I know na,” she answered, sadly.

“ Thou knowest na,” he cried. “ Surely, thou knowest if thou ha’ the heart to wed with me ; *Ja*, or *Nein* ? ”

She was standing before him with downcast eyes, rolling her bare arms in and out of her apron.

“ I ha’ been taught,” she demurred, “ that na modest *Madl* lets herself care for a man, ere she be wed.”

“ *So-a, so-a*,” smiled Herr Walter. “ *Ach*, but thou’rt a rare one to tease, little Nannele.”

Then suddenly he spoke, out-right and somewhat sharply.

“ Give me thine answer,” he said. “ I will na wait longer.”

“ Thou wilt na ? ” she asked.

“ *Nein*. I will na.”

“ Listen, then,” she said, her voice deepening. “ I might like thee—a little—mayhap. But —.”

"I'l fash myself over na 'Buts,'" he cried.
"Nannele, I will ha' thee. Whether thou wilt,
or na."

"And Bas' Theres?" she faltered.

"*Ach*, Bas' Theres. Always Bas' Theres. What
ha' I to do with Bas' Theres? It is thee I want,
Nannele; thee only. Moreover, it is thee I will
have."

VI

"Na One of Ye Need Go Against Bas' Theres"

THE dance broke late. It was long after midnight when Bas' Theres came bustling into the *Stube* with her kerchief awry and a tell-tale look in her eyes as though she had caught herself napping. In her hand she held a half-dozen great iron door-keys—each one nigh a quarter-yard long—which she swung to and fro until they clashed together and rang.

"Two o' the clock," she cried. "*Hei*, do ye hear? Two o' the clock. Be off now, every one of ye. And do na ye dilly-dally. Ye silly *Mädchen*, what can ye be a-thinking of? With the far trudge up over the hills, ye'l scarce reach home now till cock-crowing.

Ach! Ye'l ne'er sneak in at the cattle-stall windows this night, I tell ye, afore the fathers catch ye. *Hei, hei. Hei, hei.*"

It was her little joke—slightly time-worn, per-

haps, as was only natural, she having used it for years as a good night hint; but it was so much a part of the evening, that not until it had been spoken would the company dream of breaking up. The girls received it—girl-fashion—with giggles and blushes, while their partners led them out, once again, for a final whirl; but Bas' Theres had her word for them also.

“As for ye, my fine lads, will ye never ha' dancing enough? Be-think ye, there are *festa* days yet on the way. *Hei*, do as I bid ye, and let the silly maids go.”

With a mocking curt'sy, and a kindly twinkle in her blue eyes, she turned to the one or two stray young gentlemen—mere schoolboys, they were—and added:

“And ye, my pretty Barons, mayhap ye mind better than old Bas' Theres what the tutors are like to give ye to-morrow. Let us hope it may be naught worse than a long wind of Latin or Greek, but I'd na willingly stand in ye'r shoes.”

“*Heilige Maria!*” she exclaimed, rattling the keys.

"Once more, I tell ye, glad shall I be to lock ye all out. *Ja*, the very last one of ye. For when ye are gone, 'tis then that my day's work will ha' just begun. Be off with ye then. Be off. Be off."

The tired fiddlers roused, loosened the turning-pins with a will and slipped the violins into their green baize bags. The Wirth threw down his cards with a wide-mouthed yawn. The Notary scooped in his *Kreutzer* winnings. The priest glided silently out.

While the girls were tying their kerchiefs under their chins, the men stopped for a last stoup of wine; but at last, each one with an arm around his sweetheart's waist, they bade Bas' Theres a noisy good-night and went clattering down the garden stair and away toward the hills.

As the *Stube* cleared, a strange sudden silence prevailed. Bas' Theres stepped about here and there, thriftily turning out the lights; all save one. The Wirth rose from his elbow-chair, stretched himself, and yawned.

"Sure, thou'st filled thy till full up to-night, Bas'

Theres," he said, with his slow smile. "*Nit wahr?*"

"*Ja wohl,*" she answered. "And ha' needs must tap a fresh cask of beer. Dancing makes thirst; and thirst makes good money—for us. What think'st thou of that, Herr *Brüderli?*"

She was nodding her head toward him and chuckling, in a gayety unusual to her; for playfulness in Bas' Theres was like lambent sunlight on a Dolomite crag. So it chanced that, unmindful of her steps, she stumbled over something on the floor and clutched at the nearest table to save herself from falling. As her glance fell upon Petrus, lying half across the table, with his head slouched on his arms in a drunken sleep, her face lowered. It was his out-thrust boot-leg over which she had stumbled. Now, even in the semi-darkness, she could see that his face was purple-flushed and that his lips, between which the breath drew roughly, hung swollen and loose.

"Where's the *Madl?*" she cried, looking hurriedly about her. "Petrus, wake up. Wake up, I say. Can

I na shake into thee a bit of common sense? Where's Nannele?"

Petrus only wrenched out his shoulder from under his mother's hand and, muttering confusedly, slept again.

"Nannele is here with me," said Herr Walter, as he led the girl in from the garden doorway. "Herr Wirth, she has promised me to make her choice this night. Where then is her cousin?"

"Eh, eh, what?" yawned the sleepy Wirth. "What is't ye say?"

Bas' Theres broke in angrily.

"Choice? What choice? Why, *Mann*, it is two o' the clock, long past. 'Twar idle talking to-night."

Herr Walter stood facing her with Nannele's hand held fast in his. There was deep silence for a moment, then slowly the Wirth came shambling along the room to take his place at his sister's side. It was so he stood by her always.

"What is all this?" he asked. "I—I do na understand."

"'Tis naught. *Absolut* naught," cried Bas' Theres.

"*Bruder*, send the *Madl* to bed."

"*Nein*," spoke Herr Walter, resolutely. "The Herr Wirth has given his word that the *Madl* may choose."

"*Na, na*, not so," denied the Wirth. "I ne'er said she war to choose. I said only, that——. *Ach*, I forget what it war that I said."

"That she should na be forced to wed against her will," interposed Herr Walter. "It is the same."

"Did'st say it, *Bruder*?" asked Bas' Theres, fixing him with the blue steel of her eyes. "I hadna thought it of thee. Thou did'st say it; *ja*? Then, thou hast given thy word."

In his distress the Wirth's little indefinite features seemed about to lose themselves in a slough of vacuity; but, proudly as though she were an armoured knight, Bas' Theres turned to the stranger, and flung down her gauntlet before him.

"Let her choose then," she cried. "Since my brother hath said it, think'st thou I would forbid? Let the *Madl* choose. Why should she na?"

Half-unconsciously, as though she felt the ache of a sob inside it, she put up one hand to her throat; but the voice was instantly clear in which she called:

"Petrus. Come, Petrus. Come and plead for thy bride like a man. *Hei*, Petrus, hast na heard? The stranger will ha' Nannele choose. Come then. In this one little quarter-hour show thyself the true son of thy mother."

Petrus unfolded his arms and opened his bleared eyes to peer about him, but he did not lift his head.

"The *Madl* may choose to her liking," he muttered, sullenly. "Na one of ye all need think I care."

Bas' Theres reached her strong sinewy hands across the table and pulled him to his feet.

"Art mad?" she cried.

She would not let him slink away, as he tried to do, but pulled him over to where the three were waiting and compelled him to stand there with her. When he reeled and swayed she stepped a half-step

behind him and set her own shoulder, as a prop, against his.

"Now speak," she commanded.

"I—I ha' naught to say," he reiterated.

"Then 'tis I who will speak," she cried. "Herr Wirth, my brother, the lad has always thought to marry thy Nannele. He's been brought up to expect it. Is't fair that now—just to-night when he's fool-drunk with wine—is't fair his bride should be stolen from him? What right has this stranger to come between? Speak up, *Bruder mein*. Stand by thine own old sisterli as thou hast stood by her ever. Let na the foolish old heart of me be broken quite. List to my lad. Or list to the mother who pleads for him. Let na this cruel thing be. *Mein Bruder. Mein Bruder* ——."

Her cry rang out in a passionate wail that beat and throbbed upon the silence of the room. All the long-pent, heart-held anguish of her life was in it; anguish so alive that even the echoes, catching up the cry, divined it, and in their mocking play tossed

it wailing back to her. It was not until the throb of it died quite away that Herr Walter could trust himself to speak."

"And I," he said at last. "I ha' told thy daughter that I love her, Herr Wirth. Also, 'tis na to-night that she sees her cousin for the first time. Surely, the *Madl* must know her own mind. Then let her choose."

"*Na, na*," whimpered the Wirth. "I do na like it. I care naught for Petrus, the *Lump*. But ——"

He stopped, pulled himself together and said firmly: "*Nein!* I willna go against Bas' Theres."

At this Petrus lifted his head and threw off his drunken haze. Before any of them were aware, he had sprung forward and seized the girl.

"*Hei*, dost hear? Thou'rt mine. Thou, and all that thou hast. Thy father hath said it. Thou'st been pledged to me all our lives long; *nit wahr?* Think't then, I would let thee go? *Na, na*, I'm na such a fool. Hold thy tongue, *Madl*. Thou'rt mine."

Bas' Theres stood rigid; and a look of slow cold

horror came creeping into the keen eyes from which the scales were falling. But in Herr Walter's eyes was a tiger-gleam.

"Unhand the *Madl*," he cried.

Instantly Petrus felt himself grappled from behind and pinioned. That clutch on his wrists palsied them. Perforce, his hold of the girl loosed. Nannele sprang free, and the two men closed together.

Though fierce enough the tussle was a short one. At his best Petrus was no match for the well-knit Alpinist who, by many a perilous glacier-climb, had trained himself to suppleness of joint and steadiness of nerve. Now, in his drunken impotency, the foolish lad was quickly mastered and there before them all—before the old man who sheltered him, before the girl who had scorned him, before the mother whom he shamed—there, in the stranger's powerful unpitying grip, he was shaking to and fro like a flimsy rag.

Goaded at last to utter savagery he stole one treacherous hand to his hip. The mother-eyes

flashed fire. There was a swift upward sweep of his arm, met by a forward thrust of hers ; there was the gleam of metal ; a shriek from the frightened girl ; then, the naked blade whizzed, and struck—only on a bunch of door-keys held in those mother-hands, falling thence to the floor.

“Petrus,” cried Bas’ Theres, dropping the keys with a clang.

“Petrus. Art—thou—my—son ?”

Step by step, as he went backing down the long slow length of the room and sank to a seat on the wall-bench, sobered and still, her eyes followed him. And when once again she turned to where the Wirth was standing—stock-still, like a block of stone, with Nannele sobbing, and clinging to him—years seemed to have gone over her head, her face was ashen, her eyes were crazed, and the feebleness of age was upon her.

“Hast seen ?” she asked, in a low hoarse whisper. “*Bruder*, hast seen ? Tell me, war it true ? Mayhap I war dreaming. Oh, I hope I war only dream-

ing. It seems so long ago ; so long——. *Na?* Did'st say, *Na?* Then thou hast seen it also. Tell me, *Bruder.*"

She waited, but no one of them answered her. The Wirth could not. And Herr Walter—well, Herr Walter was mentally lashing himself.

"I might ha' let go of him sooner," was his thought.

As she turned her eager gaze from one to another, waiting still, she was shaking from head to foot. A shiver ran through her sturdy frame, her teeth chattered ; and when she tried to speak, as she did try once or twice, no words would come. But all at once by an effort of will she recovered herself, the steady light came back to her eyes and the steadfast strength to her heart.

"Give me thy hand, Nannele," she said. "And thou also, Herr Stranger."

Silently each stretched out a hand to her and for a moment she held them close and still ; then she laid them together, the woman's hand within the man's, and folded them both in her own.

"Na one of ye need go against Bas' Theres," she said, with a brave bright smile. "Look, it is I who will choose. Herr Stranger, the *Madl*—is—thine."

To every soul in its passage through the world is proffered one moment of supreme renunciation ; a gift and yet a touchstone.

This was hers. She had neither missed of it, nor failed. Nevertheless, because she was only a poor, heart-broken woman, like any other on whom life crowds hard, her courage snapped, the smile broke into a choking sob and, flinging away from them all, she threw herself down at the nearest table, clasped her arms over her head and sat dumbly rocking back and forth ; back and forth. Only the heaving of her stalwart shoulders betokened the unspent force of the inner storm.

Herr Walter drew in his breath sharply.

"If 'twar aught else than to give up Nannele," he said, "I would do it for thee, Bas' Theres."

"I'm a fool," she sorrowed, with her face buried in her hands. "I ha' been a fool always. And I ha'

spoilt my life. Brother, I love the *Madl*. I wouldna see a harm come to her. But I ha' loved my own lad, too. *Ach ja*, my—own—little—lad. Him, I ha' loved best of all."

Here she turned on them all, fiercely.

"Mayhap, too, ye think I ha' loved the long hard days of toil and the nights of planning. Mayhap ye think I ha' never longed for an easier life. Nor dreamed of how sweet it must be, to be cared for, as other women are ; to be honored and loved and—and all that. Mayhap ye think I'm na woman-like at all, but only a man in a *Kirtel*, because I'm strong, and I do na whine. Well then, let me tell ye true. It may be news to ye. If so be as in all this wide world there war such a one for me, I would lean my old gray head on a loving heart, and thank God. But I see now, I ha' been a fool always. And I ha' spoilt my life."

In a moment Nannele's arms were around her neck.

"*Na, na*, Bas' Theres," she cried. "Dear old Bas' Theres. Thy life isna spoilt. It couldna be. I ha'

never seen it so clear before, but I see it now. Thou'st been a-loving us all and forgetting to love thyself. *Ach* then, we shall but love thee the more and the better. Thou'lt see. Thou'lt see."

All this time Petrus was slouching on the wall-bench in sloven mood ; half-repentant, it might be, yet sullen. Now he lifted his head and stared. Never before, throughout all his young life, had he seen Bas' Theres give way.

Pitifully enough, the very intensity of her self-devotion had worked against her ; blinding him, as it blinded all who were nearest her. They never dreamed that she was continually self-sacrificing herself. If they had thought about it at all, they would have said she was doing what she liked to do, and simply having her own way.

Petrus started to his feet and rushed to her side with a broken cry :

"*Mutter*," he said, "I ha' been a bad son to thee. But I didna know. I—I never saw thee cry before. I thought my heart would burst, just now, when I

saw thee cry. Mayhap, after what ye ha' seen, na one of ye all can believe me ; but—but I'l be a *man*-son to thee from this night forth, *Mutter*."

Surely her cup was almost full. It filled to the brim and ran over when the Wirth went to her and, laying both his pudgy hands on her shoulders, said :

"Bas' Theres, thee mustna be a-thinking I would send thy lad adrift. *Na, na*, he shall bide on here at the old inn just the same. There's enough and to spare for me, and for thee, and for—him."

Over the poor worn furrowed face tears were streaming. But through the tears, there beamed on them now the brave bright sunshiny smile which was her birthright.

"I'm liking it that ye're all a-loving me," she said. "And ye must na mind it that I'm a-laughing and a-crying both together. Didna I just tell ye, I ha' always been a fool."

BAS' THERES

A
NARRATIVE-DRAMA
OF TIROL

BY
JEAN PORTER RUDD







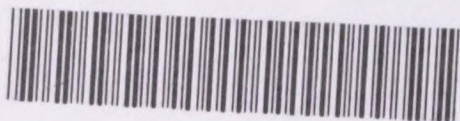








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